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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of the North Carolina State University Transition Program (UTP) in enhancing transition of disadvantaged students from high school and increasing their persistence to degree. The UTP, which targets academically underprepared African American and Native American students, provides special courses and counseling services. It was hypothesized that such students experienced a clash of educational cultures as they moved from structured and supervised learning environments in high school (often rural) to the autonomous and competitive learning environment at this urban, research university. Data were obtained from focus group interviews during students' freshman year, staff interviews, observations, and records. The study found that students were interested in having a faculty mentor in their field of study; there was a discrepancy between students' learning style and the teaching style of the majority of instructors; residence hall living was a major adjustment; students' nutrition appeared to be problematic; students experienced feelings of homesickness early in the academic year but later appreciated their independence; and students feared failing and having to return home. The study noted that students expressed positive views of the assistance provided through the UTP, including financial aid, help with registration, and special math and writing courses, but also seemed to need stronger support for personal development. (Contains 14 references.) (SW)

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Transitioning from high school to college: surviving a clash of educational cultures

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Introduction

North Carolina State University (NCSU) is a large, urban research university with a heavy emphasis on natural sciences, mathematics, engineering and technology disciplines. The University's environment is competitive, with high expectations for autonomy and independent learning. Paradoxically, the University articulates a value for inclusiveness that matches the purposes of land grant institutions' mission as the people's universities. Several initiatives to foster diversity among faculty and students reflect administrative efforts to move articulation of this value to a reality.

The University Transition Program (UTP) at NCSU is an example of institutional effort to enhance diversity. The program was developed in 1985 under affirmative action policy and it targets students of color (African American and Native American) who enter the University on the floor of admission requirements. The major program goal is to enhance the chances of this population to persist in the university until degree completion. The program consists of a combination of academic services and personal support provided to program participants during the freshman year. The UTP is housed in the First Year College (FYC) at NCSU and it not only addresses diversity efforts, but also addresses university-wide concerns regarding students' academic achievement reflected in institutional performance criteria such as retention and completion rates. Specifically, the program seeks to facilitate the transition of academically

under-prepared students into the university environment in order to enhance their chances of academic success (i.e. enrollment into a college, retention in and progression through their respective curriculums, average or higher cumulative grade point averages and degree completion). The program provides an array of special courses and counseling services as a means of promoting the *future* academic performance of students. Objectives of the UTP are: to enhance students' academic skills in basic mathematics; to enhance students' academic skills in writing and critical thinking; to enhance students' academic survival skills (i.e. study skills, library access, computer use, etc.) and to enhance students' self-esteem and personal motivation for academic success.

Technically, students are no longer part of the program in the second year of enrollment in the university. However program staff do not abandon students who continue to seek their help. Between 1985 and 1995, approximately 545 students entered the University through UTP excluding the 55 currently enrolled. Two hundred thirty five students graduated for a completion rate of 43 percent which is comparable to students of color who enter the University under traditional admission procedures.

Program Description

Students can matriculate into the university as UTP students during the summer or the fall (Gilbert, W. S, 1996). Students who enter during the summer attend a six week summer program that provides basic courses in mathematics and English in sections restricted to UTP students. In addition to prescribed courses, students attend a daily Personal Development

Seminar (Clarke, D. C., 1992). During the academic year UTP students (summer and fall) attend a two-semester orientation course in addition to carrying a full course load (12 hour minimum) of general education courses. The orientation course, sponsored by the Counselor Education Department in the College of Education and Psychology, includes a personal counseling component which requires students to meet with graduate assistants at least twice per semester to discuss their personal development, more counseling sessions are available if students feel it is necessary (Mazzuca, L.C., 1983). Students are also provided with academic advising for course selection and career counseling to realistically match career goals to academic ability.

Conceptual Framework

Students are multi-dimensional creatures who consist of both thinking and feeling. The capacity to think and feel is a continuous evolution, changing with new experiences. The college experience provides a forum for students' cognitive (learning) and affective (personal) change, ideally in a positive direction. Pascarella, E. T. and Terenzini, P.T. (1991) conducted a meta-analysis of two decades of research and report

> Students not only make statistically significant gains in factual knowledge and in a range of general cognitive and intellectual skills; they also change on a broad array of value, attitudinal, psychosocial and moral dimensions. There is some modest tendency for changes in intellectual skills to be larger in magnitude than changes in other areas, but the evidence is quite consistent in indicating that the changes coincident with the college years extend substantially beyond cognitive growth. Thus, the change that occurs during the college years does not appear to

> be concentrated in a few isolated areas. Rather, the research portrays the college student as changing in an integrated way, with change in any one area appearing to be part of a mutually reinforcing network or pattern of change in other areas. (p.57)

In order for colleges to have a chance to influence change in students' cognitive and affective skills, retention in the institutions' environment is essential. Like students, institutions are multi-dimensional, consisting of both academic and social environments that define student experiences for academic and personal growth opportunities (Tinto, 1987; Rendon, 1994). Students must successfully manage both environments (academic and social) in order to reach their educational goals. Considerable research reports the importance of academic and social integration into the college environment to students academic performance (Eimers, M. T. & Pike, G. R., 1996; Grosset, J. M., 1995; Bers, T. H. & Smith, K. E., 1991; Walleri, R. D. & Peglow-Hoch, M., 1988; Von Destinon, M., 1988; Stage, F. K. 1987; Terenzini, P. T. & Wrigth, T. M., 1987).

The UTP operates on the premise that a holistic approach is essential to students' successful transition from high school to college. The program has elements grounded in Perry's student development model (Moore, W. S., 1990) since program services seek to help student progress through various stages of development. Students' cognitive and affective development contributes to their successful social and academic integration into the university environment. Further, the extent to which the development and integration processes are effective in the first year of matriculation determines whether students successfully make the transition from high

school to college. Ultimately, the successful transition from the high school environment to the university environment will contribute to student persistence to degree completion.

Research Purpose

The research reported here is part of a large, comprehensive program assessment project to determine the impact of the UTP program on students' college experiences and academic performance. This section of the research focuses on understanding how students successfully managed their transition from high school (often rural) to a science based, research university (urban); and the extent to which the UTP program supported their transition. The guiding hypothesis was that students experienced a clash of educational cultures as they moved from a structured, highly supervised, collaborative learning environment (high school) to an abstract, autonomous, and competitive learning environment (research university).

The transition process is a complex phenomenon. Understanding this phenomenon contributes to higher education practitioners' ability to develop programs that are effective in fostering student retention. Developing effective interventions to enhance students' academic performance is more of an art than a science, rather evolutionary in nature; much like the transition process. This research contributes to our understanding of students' transition and what it takes for them to be successful in their college careers.

Research Methods

Understanding the transition process from students' perspectives was the main objective of the research. The qualitative paradigm was selected since the intent was to discover the transition and give a voice to students regarding the university's efforts to foster their transition. The research was guided by the following questions: (a) how do students transition from high school to college? and how effective is the UTP in preparing students for academic rigor and personal survival in a research university environment?

The primary data collection strategy was focus group interviews (students), and that strategy was supplemented with document analysis (program records, student reflections), observations and interviews (program staff). Interview, observation and document review protocols were developed to facilitate systematic data collection. Focus group interviews were held with students at three points during their freshman year. Each interview period consisted of six to eight groups with an average of seven students per session. The interviews were audio-taped and lasted sixty minutes on average. Interview data and field note observations were typed to ease the data analysis process. Data analysis was continuous during the academic year, consisting of a content analysis of data to determine themes regarding the transition process across data types (interview, document review and observations). When themes started to emerge, program staff were interviewed to determine the extent to which they observed the data's revelation during their daily contact with students (confirmation of findings).

Findings

Research question one: How do students transition from high school to college?

Three main themes emerged from the data: academic transition, physical transition, emotional transition. These themes, and sub-themes are discussed in the following sections.

Academic Transition

The academic transition theme reflects the academic life of students as they adjust to being a "college student." This theme includes two main themes (seemingly interrelated) in the data: student learning vs. teaching style discord and student-teacher relationship preference.

Student learning vs. teaching style discord. Students in the UTP program entered the university academically under-prepared, but with a tremendous amount of motivation. These students needed more precision in the directions for assignments and in the critiques of their assignments. These students tended *not* to be abstract thinkers and had difficulty transferring learning from one context to another. The teaching style of the majority of their instructors focused on philosophical concepts, loosely structured points for discussion and infrequent direct relationships to required readings. The critique of academic performance on assignments often referenced required texts, leaving the student to find general examples and infer meaning to the specifics of their work. If you think of learning as the progressive acquisitions of an understanding of content in an academic area, then the students' academic foundation is likely to weaken over time and eventually crumble. This pending disaster will likely have a negative

impact on the institution (attrition) and on the student (loss of self-esteem).

Student-teacher relationship. The students expressed an interest in having a faculty mentor. When asked if they would rather have a mentor of the same race or of their same field, without hesitation they responded that they would prefer someone in their field who could help them with their career development. This revelation was rather unexpected and upon further probing it was discovered that their experience to date was that they struggled as much (or more) with faculty of their same race as they did with different race faculty. They deduced that if they had to struggle with faculty, it should pay-off in career development which was their purpose for entering the university.

Physical Transition Themes (Creature Comforts)

The physical transition theme reflects the adjustments students make to the environment now called "home." For many of these students, life in a residential college marks the first time that they stayed away from home for an extended period of time. It also was the first time that they were the primary provider for their physical needs. This theme consist of three sub-themes, communal living adjustments, nutritional adjustments and feelings of safety.

Communal Living Adjustments. Students found residence hall living to be a major adjustment. One adjustment was to the perceived decrease in the quality of surroundings compared to home. The living facilities were perceived to be crowded, inadequate ventilated, often in need of repair and never clean enough for human habitation. The number of people in a small space was rather unexpected for most students. The noise level and volume activity in the residence halls were

also sources of distraction for study and for rest.

Nutritional adjustments. Students found the quality of food to be less than desirable and often opted for food with empty calories. When personal resources dictated that they had to partake in university dining services, they often found that serving hours conflicted with their student schedules (classes, tutorials or work). Although students complained about the food, it was clear that bad food was preferable to no food. Education on good nutrition could help academic performance since nutrition can affect health and ultimately deter academic success.

Feelings of safety. Most students indicated that they felt secure on campus. Interestingly, the few students who did not feel safe were male students. Feeling safe on campus could be a false sense of security since there were several reports of aggressive crimes on campus during the course of the research. This feeling of security could lead to some poor judgments for behavior (i.e. late night hours of working in isolated areas).

Emotional Transition

The transition to college not only included academic and physical adaptations, but also included emotional adaptations. We logically think of academic needs of students since college is an experience devoted to cognitive development and knowledge gain which lead to the development of programs and services to address those needs. Physical needs are even considered, on residential campuses, through campus residence halls' programs and campus dining services. However, the emergence of the emotional theme indicates that students are indeed complex being with many needs, some of which could potentially be a deterrent to the

academic goal that they pursue. The emotional transition theme includes three sub-themes: feeling homesick, independence and fear of failure.

Feeling homesick. Early in the academic year students indicated that they felt an inner void from the lack of contact with family and most indicated a desire to go home frequently. Further probing indicated that what they missed was the feeling of something familiar, secure. Parental inquiries into student plans, favorite meals, arguments with siblings and sleeping in their own bed were cited as examples of longings for home. Students indicated early on that being totally responsible for their own actions was rather disconcerting.

Independence. As the academic year progressed, students reported an appreciation for their independence. Feeling homesick and the fear of responsibility was replaced with a sense of empowerment through their independence. Students started to indicate a dread of going home, knowing that the freedom to come and go without question would be replaced with parental house rules. The lack of creature comforts and increased responsibility was considered to be a fair price for the sense of independence developed over the year.

Fear of failure. Students indicated that they had rather lofty goals and ambitious visions of the future. The optimistic view of their future, the underlying reason for entering the university, was clouded by the fear of being unsuccessful (i.e. having to drop out with no hope of earning the degree). Students felt overwhelmed with the amount of work and the seemingly lack of time to complete tasks with any measure of quality or creativity. Students indicated that they feared failing and having to return home to face those who expected them to be successful. The fear of

failure was so strong that, for many of these students, procrastination became a familiar avoidance technique. This pattern resulted in having work accumulate, leading to more feelings of being overwhelmed, leading to fear of failure....forcing students into a continuous cycle that they found difficult to break.

Research question two: how effective is the UTP in preparing students for academic rigor and personal survival in a research university environment?

Generally, students were positive in their view of UTP. The felt that the program provided a means for them to adjust to university life. Services such as help with registration, financial aid and course selection were viewed tremendous benefits to helping them understand "the system" and their responsibilities. Scheduling students in math and writing courses where the majority of the class were UTP students was viewed a positive strategy, particularly during the first semester. For other academic courses, having sections with large representation of UTP students was viewed positively. These classes enhance students' comfort levels for actively participating in class discussions and activities. Students reported that the UTP staff were especially helpful and they understood why the staff tended to be rather intrusive during their first months on campus.

Positive Reinforcement. With the exception of the program director and an occasional mention of a faculty member, students tended to have too few sources of positive reinforcement. Most comments (faculty, some staff) threaten failure rather than pointed to potential success. Students relied on other students in the program for positive support. Stronger support for the personal development of these students could potentially support their academic development.

Other themes. Another theme that started to emerge, was the gender differences in social needs. Female students tended to be more interested in developing permanent personal relationships (romantic) than they were in their academic and professional development. Male students were much more interested in their academic and professional development than they were in developing romantic relationships. Male students tended to prefer social activities that were public, group activities (intramural sports, organizations' parties, institutional athletics) than private, one-on-one activities (dating).

Conclusions

Students' transition from high school to college was complex, continual and comprehensive, involving their academic, physical and personal (emotional) development. The process was evolutionary, occurring over the course of the academic year, which suggests the importance of allowing time for the transition and timing appropriate supports to compliment each phase of the transition process.

Further research could help practitioners by determining the point at which students trade dependence (e.g. parents, program staff) for independence (self-reliance). This would inform practice by indicating to staff when to "transition" from close supervision to on call availability. Perhaps most importantly, this study suggests that same race conditions alone is not enough to insure effective faculty-student relationships. Further research on race-based faculty-student relationships, from the faculty perspective, would contribute to our knowledge of the connection between faculty-student relationships and students persistence to degree completion.

Program Development Action

As a result of this research, program administrators are in the process of a complete overhaul of the program. Items under consideration include the development of a course composed predominately of UTP students and taught by faculty sensitive to the learning needs of this population; a mandatory tutorial sessions for math and for English/writing courses; structured advising/counseling to teach students how to manage their own survival and to monitor their college experiences; and long-term follow-up on future cohorts' performance beyond the freshman year in order to continuously improve the programs' services.

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